



As *Fifty Shades* fever takes hold, Alix Fox (above) heads to Club Pedestal, where it's the girls now taking control and the men who have to obey their every demand

## Meet the female Christian Greys

**TUCKED BENEATH A RAILWAY** arch in South London is a club with bare brick walls, subdued lighting and a thudding bass line. On most nights of the week it's like any other cool venue, packed with a thirsty after-work crowd struggling to get to the bar. But this evening, it's playing host to a very different kind of night.

The crowd is still young and glamorous, chatting excitedly above the buzz. Sarah\* is one of them, dressed in seamed stockings and sipping on a glass of champagne. But at her feet lie two men dressed in nothing but rubber

boxer shorts, kissing the soles of her crystal-encrusted Christian Louboutins. A third kneels to proffer another drink. Opposite her, a girl is scrawling insults on a good-looking, 30-something bloke's chest in permanent marker, following his instructions to 'please write on me'.

The much-anticipated *Fifty Shades Of Grey* film might finally be hitting the big screens, but while its focus is on Christian Grey, the billionaire who makes it his mission to convert the innocent Anastasia Steele and get her to submit to his bondage-loving ways, the club scene is seeing a wave of 'Christina Greys' ▶

– high-flying women who are flipping submission on its head. Here, at Club Pedestal – one of London’s newly popular party nights for ‘dominant females and submissive males who worship them’ – it’s the young women who are exclusively in charge, while men serve them with expensive fizz, flowers... and anything else they might need. But not sex. This night is about submission and humiliation, not the actual act itself.

Club Pedestal is the most popular and coolest female dominance night in the UK. Over the last few years – and particularly since E.L. James brought S&M ‘mainstream’ – it’s become busier than ever. Perhaps it shouldn’t be a surprise that, unlike the success of *Fifty Shades* suggests, women want to do the dominating. In fact, a recent Ann Summers survey found that 85 per cent of women feel they relate more to *Fifty Shades*’ commanding Mr Grey than they do the meek Miss Steele.

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Clinical psychologist Dr Siri Harrison thinks it makes sense. ‘I’m not surprised to hear there are a lot of professional women who are now going to clubs like these,’ she says. ‘That desire to be in control and be the one who calls the shots isn’t exclusive to men.’

The club nights are bi-monthly and tickets, which cost £20 in advance or £40 on the door, consistently sell out – they’ve even had people travel from as far away as India to attend. ‘We’ve had 400 people attend tonight, despite the fact it’s a freezing Thursday in January,’ says the organiser, a man who wishes only to be known as Derek. But whereas with most standard S&M nights – where dominant men can attend too – here, it’s strictly only the women who are taking charge.

Bankers and lawyers mingle with media executives and students in their twenties and thirties. But why are they here? For Anya\*, who first heard about Pedestal on a social-networking site, it’s about releasing



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pent-up stress. ‘I work in a high-pressure sales job; my days are spent working to hit tough targets and having to be polite to people even when they’re testing my patience,’ says the 28-year-old. ‘Here, I can tell a “slave” to rub my back to help me relax, and let off steam by shouting at him, secure in the knowledge that whatever I say and do will be met with utter delight. It’s a huge stress-reliever and confidence boost, having permission to put down guys who are four times my size, then watch them grovel and beg to serve me.’

Again, Dr Harrison isn’t surprised. ‘In work environments, if women do try and let out aggression, they can find themselves labelled a bitch,’ she says. ‘We find it more acceptable for a man to act out of anger, whereas women are dismissed as being overly emotional. Clubs like this become

a space to be able to express the kind of emotions that, in any other kind of environment, aren’t considered appropriate.’

Anya is here with her boyfriend Colin\*, 33, a lawyer who says he gets a buzz from watching her boss other men around, and finds it calming to follow orders himself. ‘I have to manage others and make important decisions all the time,’ he reveals. ‘It’s nice to be absolved from that responsibility for a night and have someone else decide what I should do.’ Although they sometimes do role play at home, it’s here where they can truly escape and live out their fantasies.

But Anya often attends Club Pedestal with girlfriends, too. ‘It’s a real laugh coming as a “girl gang”; we feed off each other’s energy,’ she smiles. ‘I was once whipping a guy’s chest while my friend Jane\* was flogging his back!’

While some of the women’s orders to the men might seem intimidating, the atmosphere isn’t. There’s no strict dress code, though, in the most part, the women are exceptionally well turned out. The men, meanwhile, must make an effort to please their mistresses, whether that’s by wearing a sharp suit or nothing but a mask and lead to play the part of a loyal pet.

There isn’t a vetting process as such, but if men don’t play by the rules and obey the women’s orders, they are asked to leave. Bad behaviour is policed, and everything is safe and consensual. ‘Ladies know they’re guaranteed to be treated like divine beings here. Pedestal is their place to be pampered, to be praised, to play and to be obeyed,’ says Derek.

Jill\*, a 22-year-old student who attended the club with her friend Maisie, says, ‘It’s so liberating being able to dress sexily, own my body and express my sexuality without that being interpreted as a cue for men to harass me,’ she enthuses. Although a few people have met partners here, it’s mostly not about hooking up with someone, but escaping from reality for a night and exploring your fantasies somewhere you won’t be judged.

‘Perhaps it’s a sad reflection on mainstream culture, but I feel safer here than at normal clubs,’ adds Maisie. ‘You can get involved as much or as little as you want, and if you say “no”, your boundaries are respected without question.’

As the night comes to a close, usually around 5am, the spell is broken. The men hang up their leads and masks, and put their clothes back on. The women button up their coats and step outside, back to reality, and a world where men won’t obey their every word. At least until next time. ■

\*Names have been changed. Photos: Trunk Archive, Dr Siri Harrison works for Efficacy